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ABSTRACT

The coach of a basketball team recounts the experiences encountered by his team in the California Special Olympics Basketball Tournament. Three days in the team's life are traced from the time the team boards the plane to Los Angeles, through initial defeat, to victory in the fourth game and winning third place medals. (SB)

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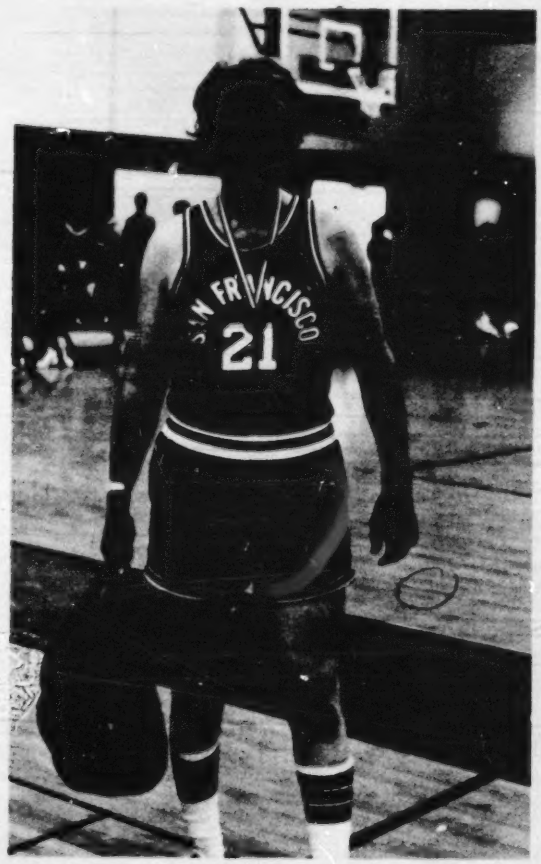
WE KILLED THEM

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF A SPECIAL OLYMPIC BASKETBALL TEAM



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"When you wish upon a star . . . dreaming will make it so!"

Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder!

In their own eyes and in those of their coach the basketball team from the San Francisco Recreation Center for the Handicapped is champion of the world! Ron Jones has brilliantly and masterfully captured the very essence of sports in this hilarious yet teary true account of trials and tribulations, joys and agonies, defeats and victories encountered by this team in the California Special Olympics Basketball Tournament. These most unusual and unlikely bronze medal winners love their opponents as themselves--they have no time or place to consider the philosophy espoused by some leading coaches that losing is worse then death since one must live with a loss.

Fun is fundamental. Taking part is basic. Enthusiasm runs rampant no matter what. Trust and faith in each other carry them individually and collectively through, over, and around many rough times. Lose and loss are not in their vocabularies. Each giving one hundred percent in his own ways results in personal satisfactions of meeting individual and group challenges confronting them. No obstacle or barrier is too great to meet head on--and to overcome. Failure and frustration are unknown to any except maybe an occasional twinge in the coach which is soon allayed and disappears. Love of life and for each other--to say nothing of their opponents--exemplifies attitudes and approaches of this unique sixsome.

In every way each exemplifies the very best and real reasons for participating actively in sports--the real meanings of the word come to life. Physical activities are engaged in for pleasure as participants live up to the ideals of good sportsmanship. Webster even defines a sport as a commendable person--how true and accurate of this outstanding team of people with a zest and zing for living and for life itself.

The very essence of participating in sports has been mastered by this group through the patience, understanding, and tender loving care of its coach. Each in his own ways has...

...established goals that are relevant, important, and meaningful to him;

...developed an ability to follow through to attain these established goals; and

...recognized that even though each is an individual, everyone must daily sublimate what is to be done for the good of the group.

Douglas MacArthur put it one way--"Upon the fields of friendly strife are sown seeds that in other days and in other fields will bear the fruits of victory." The credo of the Special Olympics puts it in still another way--"Let me win, but if I cannot win, then let me be brave in the attempt."

Thank you Michael, Eddie, Joey, Audie, and Jimmy for sharing with us your wonderful attitudes and philosophies of sports and life. And thank you Ron Jones for sharing such intimacies with your team in such an enjoyable yet pointed way.

Julian U. Stein
Executive Director and Consultant
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ON ATHLETICS

There is within us all some measure of competitive spirit, some little something that says, "Do it better!" This we try. Prehaps this is the only reason that we have become involved in athletics. Partly perhaps that we seek an outlet for nervous energy, which gathers during a day of study or a night of sleep. Perhaps we are lonely of spirit and seek a form of compaionship and solice through struggle. We can not say.

We only know this, that athletics give to us a means by which we can express our true inner selves.

Joe D. Johnson wrote and delivered this while a Junior member of the Wakefield High School (Arlington, Virginia) Track Squad. He climaxed a talk at an Annual Parent-Squad Meeting by reading this which he had prepared especially for the meeting.

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Friday Morning, June 19, 8:30 A.M.

"We're gonna kill them bums, Mr. Jones. Kill 'em. That's right. You'll see. Right, Mr. Jones? We're gonna kill them!"

Michael Rice was sliding into his cushioned airline seat. He was jabbing words at me through a confident smile. "You'll see. We're gonna murder them guys!"

My eyes followed Michael into his seat and watched as Eddie Cotter helped him with the safety belt. I counted to myself. Michael and Eddie in the seats in front of me--Joey sitting next to me--and Audie and Jimmy across the aisle. Good. Everyone's here. I counted one more time. All five are on the plane. In the past hour I have mentally lassoed these five a dozen times. In the next two days, I would count to five perhaps a thousand times. Together, we made up the San Francisco Special Olympic Basketball Team.

Michael twists in his seat in a manner that allows him to reach back and grab my hand. Just as I think Michael is going to change the topic of conversation, he smiles and reminds me of our mission. "Coach, we're gonna kill 'em!"

Michael is the team's leader, mostly because of his size and generosity. When standing, Michael bends forward like a top-heavy tree--and in motion he shuffles his feet as if on a slippery surface. Like the other players, Michael cannot add a row of numbers or write a sentence. He has not learned about Racism, Republicanism, East or Westism. The social echoes that tie you and me are not part of Michael's character. Michael welcomes strangers into his thoughts by throwing his arm around them and courting their interest--with a barrage of enthusiastic chatter. His thoughts are disarmingly honest and to the point--even if they do repeat. And though his words are predictable, his enthusiasm and affection are always a wonderful surprise. So I hold hands with this kindly giant that is talking of murder and smiling of life. And I wait to be hugged by him at some unexpected moment. I know I will find myself jumping excitedly into the air with Michael over some soon-to-be accomplishment or common-place event. I am stuck between two worlds--my world of educated reason that tells me I will perform miracles, and Michael's world of open enthusiasm and affection that tells me to pay attention. His world reminds me that the miracle is waiting in Los Angeles and it will not be orchestrated by reason.

Michael's seatmate, Eddie Cotter, doesn't like the idea of Michael standing. Eddie points all around the cabin, showing Michael that everyone is seated. Then he tells everyone about seat belts. "Put on your seat belt. Like this! Here, Michael Rice, put on your seat belt like this."

Eddie is the team's lawyer. He worries constantly about what is <u>right</u> and the performance of <u>rightness</u>. "Isn't that right, Mr. Jones? It's time. Come on you guys. It's time to put on your seat belts. Joey, you put on your seat belt like this. This is the way you do it." Joey would have none of it. He is listening to Michael's jabber about mayhem on the court. And every time Michael says the word <u>kill</u>, Joey yelps his approval and shakes both fists in the air. So I reach over and buckle Joey's seat belt.

In between Michael's game plan and Eddie's seat-belt plan, I ask Joey if this is his first time on an airplane. Joey nods yes, and punctuates the nod

with a great gulp of air. Continuing our conversation, Joey throws a hand in the air, school-boy style, and slowly tucks away fingers, until one finger points skyward. "Yes," I answer, "we're number one. We can't miss with these killer black uniforms, now can we?" I knew my words would ignite Joey's face into a smile. Joey can't hide his feelings or form words, so he talks by flooding you with his emotions. And it works. His smile and raspy sounds are telepathic. At the mention of our uniforms, Joey's eyes swell in happiness. He tilts his head back and lets loose with a choking laugh. Then, with his eyes still glistening, he directs a question at me. He points at his uniform bag, then rubs my shirt. "No," I respond, "I don't have a uniform. I'm the coach--remember." Joey grins in acknowledgement of my remember joke. Eddie continues talking about seat belts. Michael talks on about winning. Joey uses his clenched handkerchief to catch saliva rolling from his open mouth. I count to five.

Other passengers are now boarding the plane. They look stunned at row after row of athletes wearing bright yellow hats, blue warm-up jerseys, and disabled bodies. The Olympians snap the stares of these fellow passengers by applauding them. A ripple of clapping greets all passengers as they filter toward the rear of the plane. These travelers are not expecting applause in PSA Land. They smile nervously as row after row of Olympians reach out to touch them or wave hello. Within moments, athletes and passengers are shaking hands, exchanging sign language, and sharing destinations.

"Where are you kids going?"

"To Los Angeles!"

"Who are you, I mean, who do you represent, all dressed up like this?"

"We're going to Los Angeles!"

"What's going to go on down there?"

"We're gonna kill them!"

"Oh. Good luck."

"You too!"

The stewardess is reading the mandatory emergency procedures. Each precaution is met by wild cheers. Methodically, every yellow hat turns upward to find the invisible oxygen mask. And looks to the rear of the cabin for the emergency door. And under the seat for the mysterious floatation cushion. Having little luck with emergencies, attention of the Olympians turns to the sensation of movement. The plane is beginning to tip toe. Great applause from the yellow cappers. We are on our way to Los Angeles. Then, like some winged horse, the plane glides down the runway, and with a final push sails cloudward. More applause. And yelling. This time, all passengers are clapping.

I count heads. Michael and Eddie. Joey. Audie and Jimmy. Audie grabs my counting finger. His eyes are wide with fear. "I'm going to fall! I'm too high!" "Audie," I said, "it's all right. It's all right. Audie, the plane has wings--see, out there. Those are wings and the air lifts...um, the

motors push the plane...we're riding on waves of air created by--Audie, look at me. Audie, if you fall, I promise to catch you!" My explanation of air travel didn't exactly calm Audie's fear. It didn't exactly instill me with confidence either. Fortunately, for both of us, the stewardess arrived with the coca-cola cure.

Audie enjoyed his coke. He tapped my hand and asked, "Bathroommm. Bathroommm." I pointed to the line at the front of the plane. Audie stood up and moved to the front of the plane as if something important was about to happen. Actually, something important did happen. Audie is perhaps the strongest and fastest athlete in this contingent of basketball players. As a basketball player, however, he had trouble with direction. When he rebounded, he returned the ball to the closest basket. About half the time his shots were aimed at what Eddie calls the right basket. The rest of the time, he was a fantastic scoring threat for the other team. Any basket set off a spasm of delight--pure joy that was hard to stifle with the message that "Audie, you have just scored two points for the other team!"

Audie lived in high gear. Nothing he did was slow or deliberate. I guess that's why I selected Audie for our basketball team. When he would shoot down the floor like a grinning rocket, I could point to the ball he left behind. I hoped basketball would help Audie get a little control. Slow down. Run in the right direction. Well, he was going to the front of the plane and that's an accomplishment.

I did a quick body count. Michael had his arm around Eddie, talking about the right uniform to wear. Joey was gulping his coke in-between looks at me and the smile of a first time flyer. Audie was in line. Jimmy Powers, his seat mate, was asleep. It was 8:50 A.M.

Friday, Early Evening, 7:00 P.M.

We are in a sea of color. Three thousand athletes from all over California are assembled at Drake Field on the UCLA campus for the opening ceremony of the Special Olympics. Jimmy is the shortest player on our team, so I hold his hand as waves of athletic teams move about us. Joey holds my other hand. Michael, Eddie, and Audie walk ahead of us, arm in arm, like the Three Musketeers. Pride and friendship are on parade. Just as we hold each other, the sky and earth seem to move closer--brushing softly against the banners . . . listening to the muffled sounds of excitement and peals of laughter. Joining us in this celebration.

Michael is the first to let the air out of Camelot. "Those suckers are big! Mr. Jones, do you SEE those suckers? Oh, brother, those suckers are BIG!"

Sure enough, Michael is right. I stop dreaming and start being a coach. I count several towering figures wearing the red warm-ups of Fresno. And there's a giant wearing the orange and white of Tri-Valley. Michael Rice is our tallest player at six feet, four inches. These guys look closer to seven feet. "Mr. Jones, see that tall dude over there? Those suckers are mean."

I begin to question myself. I mean asking Joey to play on our team was unavoidable. I know that you're not supposed to have favorites in teaching,

but Joey and I are best friends. We liked each other immediately. I think he liked the fact that I played sports. And, as for me, I loved Joey for the way he played sports. Joey moves like a mechanical soldier. His arms are stuck in a bent position and his gait is an awkward side-to-side gallop. A gallop that races full tilt, unable to change direction or stop. To slow down, Joey often runs into things or throws his body on the ground. I guess it's that will to charge ahead, full speed, knowing you can't stop, that I admire. He has more spirit than an evangelist on a hot summer night, but sweet Jesus, he can't even catch a ball, much less dribble or shoot.

And Jimmy. Little Jimmy. He can dribble and shoot if no one stands in front of him. It's going to take more than Joey's spirit to help Jimmy even see the ball. I wish Jimmy were two feet taller. And Audie a lot slower. And Eddie--well, Eddie might be able to get the ball to Michael if he could stop debating with himself about what's the right thing to do.

It's time to start some reality therapy.

"You know, you guys, I've got an idea." Michael, Eddie, Joey, Audie, and Jimmy glue themselves to my side at this. "I was thinking, we need a team motto--you know, something special that we can share, like a secret."

The conspiracy thickens as my thoughts are welded by a uniform "ALL RIGHT!". "Good, our secret pledge for these games is <u>togetherness</u>." "YEAH!" I lower my voice into a whisper, "and instead of shouting all over the place that we're number one, I think it's better that we become number five." I put up five fingers and give each finger a player's name. "In this tournament, let's not worry so much about number one. Our job is for each player to go as hard as he can. Instead of saying we're number one, let's say we're number five!"

I stretch all five fingers in the air and hear a roar from my cohorts, "We're number five! We're number five!" This attempt at humility is followed by an unprompted, "We're gonna kill them! You watch." Eddie tailored his words. "We'll win, right?" "You'll see, Mr. Jones. We'll win those big guys." Everyone agreed with Eddie. "We're gonna murder them," Michael added. "We'll clobber them big suckers. We're number one!" The whole team shouted with Michael, "We're number one!" Joey smiled; Eddie shook his head in the affirmative; Audie jumped up and down; Jimmy held both small fists in mid-air and Michael help up one finger--which was greeted by an unanimous "We're Number One!"

I looked around and every team in my circle of vision chanted a similar claim. The big players from Fresno and Tri-Valley had their arms in the air. I fantasized that they could dunk the ball without jumping. Everyone around us was yelling "We're Number One--We're Number One!" I joined the chorus and closed Camelot's drawbridge on thoughts of <u>x's</u> and <u>o's</u> and tall centers.

"We're Number One."

"We're Number One."

I hope.

Early Saturday Morning, 5:30 A.M.

I'm right in the technicolor part of a great dream. Good outlet pass. Fill the lanes. Here comes Audie. Pull up. Float a pass rim high. Audie slams it through. Joey and I are playing the tuff defense. We double-team the ball. Joey tips it free. I'm after it. So who's knocking? What has that got to do with defense? A seven foot center skittles in my way. The door is being pounded like a drum. Bang - bang - bang. Thoughts of fire drill, aerial bombardment, and a loose ball race around in my head. Bang - bang - bang. I place a hand over my eye sockets to end the mental filmworks. And slowly, very slowly, find the barking door. When I open it, I am assaulted by a blast of cold fluorescent light. And something else. At first I can't quite make out who or what is standing in the hallway. Moving figures look like members of some assassin cult come to get me in the middle of a basketball game. They're talking about death. When my squint becomes an eye opening, I find myself staring at five basketball players in full armor. It is 5:30 in the morning and the entire basketball team is outside my door, dressed and ready to kill.

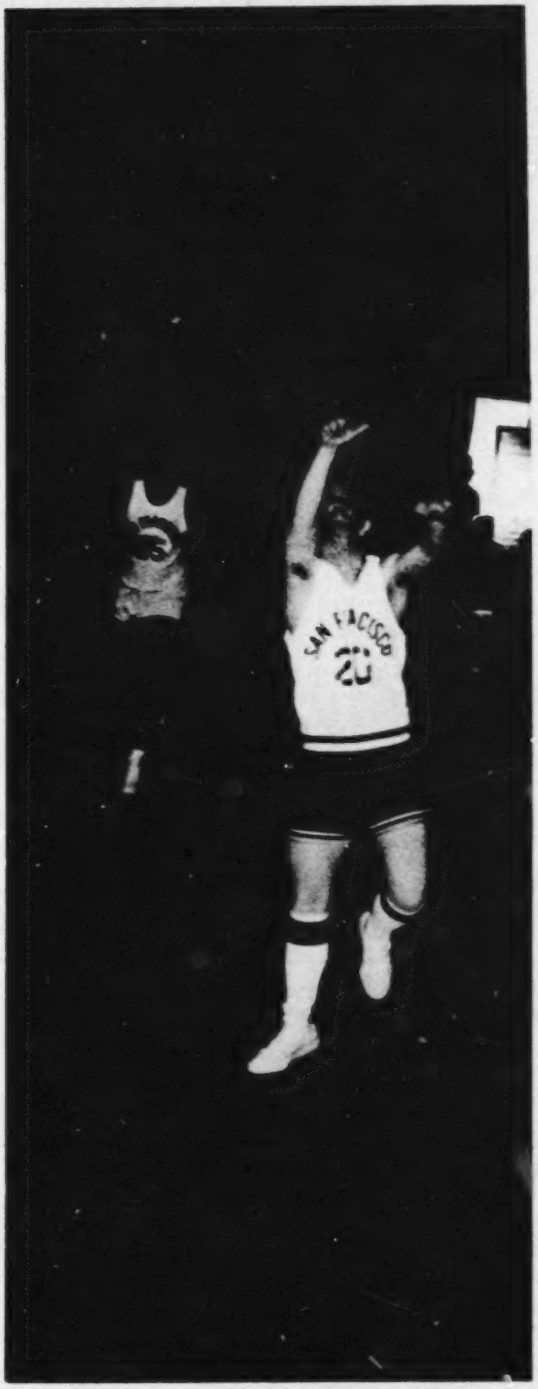
On close examination I notice that these warriors are not all that ready. Michael has tied Joey's shoes, but Joey's pants have to be held up by Joey--actually he is pinching his arms against his hips. Audie's pants are on inside out. Jimmy is holding his supporter in one hand, asking where it goes. Eddie is telling him, "It goes in your bag. Right, Mr. Jones? It goes in your bag." I shake off a dozen questions and ask one of my own, "Are you guys going to breakfast in your uniforms?" It was a silly question. Of course we went to breakfast in our uniforms. White jersey tops, with black numerals, black silk shorts trimmed in white; converse all stars and white high top socks with three black rings. When I asked Michael how everyone got into white tops instead of black, he answered matter of factly, "We're saving the black tops for the championship game."

Game One, Saturday Morning, 10:00 A.M.

Our warm-up consisted of everyone getting a free shot. Every careen of the ball promoted applause and excited yells of triumph. Joey and Audie had to race for the bathroom or risk peeing in their new uniforms. Michael rebounded each shot with a thud. Eddie paced. Joey returned to give encouragement. With each shot, he waved his crooked arms in the air like an official signalling a touchdown. When someone would make a basket, or come close, Joey would violently throw his arms downward and let out a gutteral sound of pleasure. Michael pounded the loose ball and announced, "This is it, Mr. Jones. This is the moment we've been waiting for. This is it!" Joey roared agreement. Audie ran around in a circle under the basket. He was running with both hands in the air, yelling, "Now. Now. Now!"

The first game was against Tri-Valley. The game was scheduled to last ten minutes. After this time, the team with the most points would be declared the winner. The real purpose of the game was to place teams into divisions of equal ability. The score at the end of ten minutes was 16 to 2. We got the last two points when Michael sank a twenty foot running hook. It was our only two points. Nobody seemed to care. Michael roared off the court and picked up Joey. Eddie congratulated Michael and asked what the score was now. Audie

was still running down the court unaware that the game was over. Jimmy took a Muhammad Ali victory pose and asked if he did O.K. I answered, "Man, you did; everyone did great. Just great! I was proud of you. That shot of Michael's was superb. I think if we work a little more on our defense we'll..." Michael finished the sentence--"We'll kill them!"



Actually, I was worried. We were blown away sixteen to two. That placed us in the lowest ability division, but even that was poor consolation for someone that hates to lose. I couldn't help my feelings. For too many years I have played and coached basketball. Something happens when I get inside a gym. I love it. Love to play and love to win. Every intuitive and intellectual antenna clicks into automatic at the sight of another team doing lay-ups. I found myself scouting our opponents, scrutinizing the line-up of teams, pushing my team on the floor to practice at every available free time. It's that extra effort; that extra lap or free throw that will make the difference. That's what I thought while I had everyone take defensive positions and attack the movement of the ball. We practiced holding our hands up--cutting off the baseline--stopping the dribbler. If we played defense, we just might have a chance. Defense is something you can teach. Offense is an art.

Game Two, Saturday Afternoon, 2:00 P.M.

We drew Southeast Los Angeles. You can tell the course of a game in the first few seconds. The Los Angeles team executed a tip-off play, streaked the length of the floor and scored the first two points then stole the inbound pass for a quick four point lead. Michael tried to take command of the game. He dribbled the length of the floor and cast off from the top of the key. The ball banged off the backboard and into a fast break. The score was six to nothing. I yelled at Michael, "Get underneath, let Eddie handle the ball; get underneath!" Jimmy got the ball. He tried to advance the ball up the court, but was surrounded by a wall of red uniforms. The ball kicked loose

and a Los Angeles player sank a jump shot. "My God. Did you see that shot--that kid could play for the Lakers!" I called time out.

In the huddle, I explained what I thought was our only hope. "Look, Eddie, you dribble the ball up the court and feed the ball in deep to Michael--you got that? Michael, you take the ball and go right up with it...O.K., Michael? This is the time--Go for your sky hook!" The team exploded back onto the floor loaded with confidence and visions of Michael's sky hook. I sat down, then stood back up. Michael was dribbling the length of the floor. "No, Michael, No! Get in the key!" He was trapped at the free throw line. In desperation, he rolled a pass to Jimmy, who shot. It was a set shot from thirty feet. The ball hit nothing...but net. "Two, two, yahoo! What a Shot! Nice going, Jimmy. Now we're going . . . Come on, you guys, defense. Get back. Get back. Oh, No." Following our basket, the entire team raced to congratulate Jimmy. The other team threw a court length pass for a lay-up.

During this seesaw war, Michael never did get in the pivot. I pointed. Jumped up and down. Even ran along the sidelines screaming instructions. "Michael, get under the basket. No, no, no. Don't dribble the ball." They had another steal, and another. It was xerox time. "Michael, let Eddie bring up the ball; get underneath. Michael--down there--get down there where you belong. . ." The five in white ran around officials and past the bench and to the key, and back across the center line to the other end. Dropped the ball. Kicked it. Rolled over it. Only to do it all over again.

We lost 58 to 6. The score didn't bother me as much as what this humiliation might mean for my killers in white. Michael played like a lion. He sensed the onslaught and tried all by himself to balance the score. No one could have tried harder. Eddie was simply unable to calculate the right place to be or the right pass to make. You could feel his hesitation as he rocked his arms, looking for someone to pass to or some place to run toward. Joey valiantly chased the ball the entire game. No matter where the ball went, Joey was in pursuit. Throughout the game, he didn't touch the ball. Not once. Several times he galloped right past a loose ball, grinning all the way, both arms waving like iron gates. Audie circled during most of the game, with both hands raised above his head, signalling for someone, anyone, anytime, to throw him a pass. Jimmy tried and tried and tried. I was afraid the team's heart would be broken.

The tournament official came up to me and stuffed a large brown envelope into my hand. "Here," he said, in a soft voice. "Here are the participation medals for your team--your guys might need a little pick up." Together we cranked our heads to see how my team was taking its loss. What we saw hit us with a jolt. Michael had led everyone over to the roll of mats at the end of the next court. The team was kneeling on the mats, cheering for a game in progress. Whooping it up for baskets made and passes completed. And in the midst of their yells, we both heard a spirited challenge--"We're gonna kill you guys!"

The official hung on to his envelope. "Maybe you don't need this. I mean, where did your team get its spirit? They might be the worst team in the tournament and here they are challenging everyone in sight to a shoot out at high noon." My shrug didn't answer his question, so he continued. "Do they know they just lost?" I offered an idea, "I don't think they know the difference

between winning and losing!" We were both shaking our heads in admiration and disbelief. The official took back his envelope. "Well, coach, you've got one more chance to get a medal. If you can win this afternoon at four against Sonoma, well then you can play tomorrow for a third place medal in your division. Who knows, those characters might yell themselves a medal."

I walked slowly over to my team. They were bubbling with enthusiasm. Pointing to good plays and shouting familiar directions. "Get back, get back, you turkeys. Hands up! Hands up!" They seemed wired to the play. Every nuance and gesture was picked up. A player's happiness and success was immediately known and shared by the observers. It was almost as if my team was playing another game. By throwing their voices onto the court, they participated in the game. I had always seen the game as a match-up of strategies. If one team throws up a zone, you move the ball and overload one side of the court. If an opponent is superior in ability, you slow down the game tempo. If you get ahead late in the game, you spread your offense and force your opponent to play man-to-man defense. If behind, you double-team the ball and pressure the offense... My team was watching another game and enjoying it as much as any game ever played.

I wanted to know more about this other game, when Joey jerked in front of me. He pointed across the floor--and then jabbed his hand into his chest. I nodded, yes, expecting Joey to romp for the bathroom. Joey ran straight into the game in progress. He simply joined in; chased the ball around trying to vacuum it up with his mechanical arms. I jumped after him. In between passes and fast breaks, I chased Joey around the court. When I caught him, we both joined our team. They were cheering Joey and me. And the game in progress. And future games. And their own prowess. If an alien force were to ask me about the game of basketball, I don't know who I'd send forward...Alvin Attles or Joey Asaro.

Game Four, Sunday, 12 O'Clock Noon

This is it! The big game. We've made it by accident. The Saturday afternoon game with Sonoma was a forfeit. Their bus broke down. So we played against ourselves and won. Actually, several nieces, nephews, and parents joined me in playing our Olympic team. It was the most enjoyable basketball game I've ever played. The sidelines were like rubber bands. We chased, pushed, pulled each other. Ran with the ball, passed it, tripped over it, and hugged it. Kept our own score. Forgot the score. Made up a score. Took pleasure in all manner of accomplishments.

Our self-imposed win placed us in Sunday's game for third place medals against a San Diego team. As far as our team was concerned, we had won and now we were about to play for the championship of the world.

Saturday night's waiting seemed interminable. Five uniformed players hovered about me like moths surrounding a white lamp. Every moment was filled with poking fingers, pumping hands, and landslides of conjecture. Eddie, weighing every possibility...over and over. "We should wear our black uniforms, right? We can wear them now, it's all right now, we can wear our black uniforms. Isn't it all right, Mr. Jones?" Sandwiched around Eddie's thoughts was Michael's insistence, "Too much for those guys--they don't stand a chance--not

against us. We're gonna annihilate those turkey legs from San Diego." Piercing into this constant din is Audie's fix, "What time is it? What time tomorrow do we play? What time in our black uniforms?" These three sentiments chased each other around and around. I felt I was being eaten alive by enthusiasm.

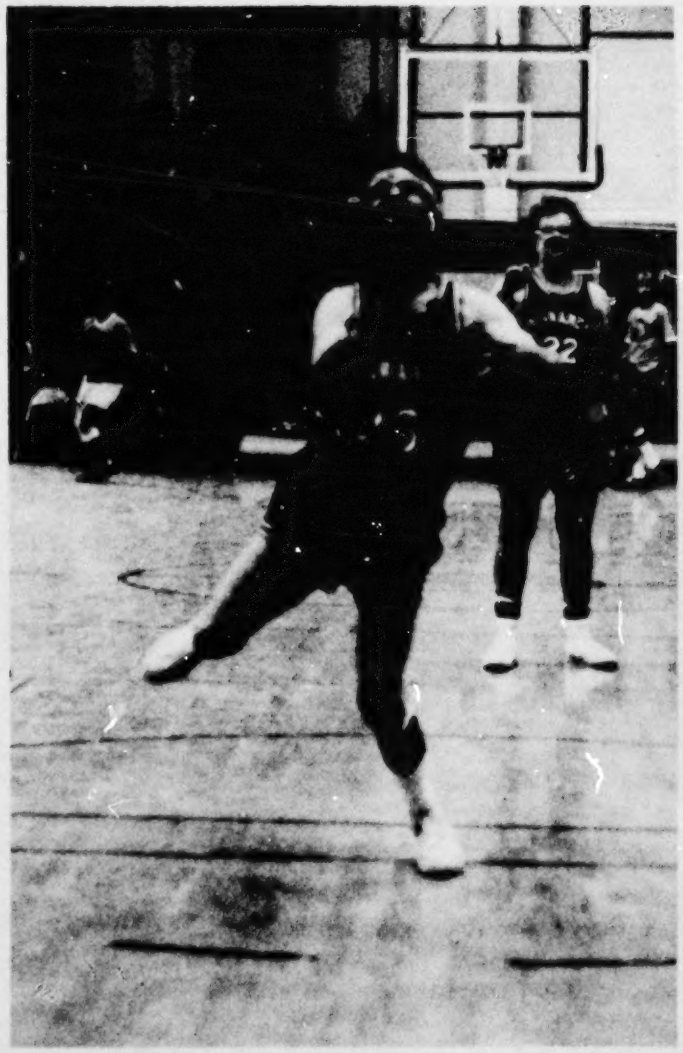
"Look, you guys have got to calm down. The game isn't until twelve o'clock tomorrow." Like an endless string of firecrackers, the mention of the game simply kicked off another round of excitement. In desperation, I tried hallway exercises. After an hour, I was beat. Audie wanted to go to the bathroom and the remainder of the team kept doing windmills, while jogging in place. Now in greater desperation, I tried a late night food raid. I figured if they ate something, anything, the talking cycle would be broken. Dressed in killer black uniforms, we attacked the candy machines in the dormitory lobby. Evidently, we were not the only team in training. The machines were simply overdosed on athletes plunking in odd assortments of coinage and then pushing all the buttons as fast as possible. The telephone in the lobby had been reduced to a sound that cried the end of the world. It wasn't a dial tone or a busy signal--but a steady whine. In this night before the BIG GAME, even God must have been a little confused.

Announcing, "Lights out," I discovered Joey kneeling, bent in prayer. He was crossing himself over and over. When finished, I asked softly, "What are you praying for?" Joey gyrated with his hands. My mind was answering for him--what a wonderful moment--he's saying the Lord's Prayer. The urgency of his gestures served to question my assumption. His hand was in a fist that stirred the air. Then a finger straightened to point at me and the converse shoes placed at the end of his bed. I offered, "Joey, you're praying for the basketball team." No, his head thundered. He hit towards me with clenched hands and lower lip curled into a grimace.

"You want to win tomorrow," I suggested. No, went his head. Michael entered the room and joined my interpretations. He knew immediately what I didn't want to see. Joey swept into motion. He crossed himself in a spastic fashion and then smiled and hit outward. Michael knew what Joey was praying for. "We're gonna kill them, right Joey!" Joey grinned in the affirmative. Then like the other players, crawled into sleep wearing a starchy black uniform.

So here we are, at last. This is it. The Big Game. The San Diego team is a little shorter than we are, but they have a pair of good shooters. And to get into this game, they've actually won a real game. Scored 26 points against Butte County. That 26 points scares me. On the basis of our warm-up shooting, I calculate it would take us three games to score that many baskets. And that's without a defense. I contemplate putting Michael and Eddie on the San Diego shooters and letting everyone else run around in a zone. No, it's not a time for match-ups, or strategy. It's a time to play hard and enjoy whatever happens. I decide to let Michael bring the ball down the court and give the team a simple rule--"If the ball comes to you--shoot!"

Both teams line up, not sure of which basket they defend or hope to shoot at. Michael gets the tip. The ball goes straight up and when it comes down, he is waiting for it. He dribbles straight ahead, full speed. Right for the basket. No one is in his way. When he stops to shoot, the trailing players pour by him. He is still alone. His shot rolls around the rim and falls off. Michael stretches his body and catches the ball with his arms extended. From this flat-footed stance, he pushes the ball once again at the target. This time it goes in. "Holy hot potato!" Pure exhilaration. The first two points are ours. "Get back! Get back!" Five players clad in black race backward. "That's it! That's it! Hands up!" They form a straight line. One behind each other, like some picket fence. It's a new defense called stand-in-a-row. I am tempted for just a moment to yell instructions, to spread them out. No. "Hands up!" The fence grows a row of points that steal the pass. "Audie, this way." "Audie, dribble the ball." Audie dribbles. He isn't running full tilt without the ball. Or circling. Or surrendering with his waving hands. Audie has his head down and he's dribbling. Dribbling under control past the half court circle. "Keep going, Audie. Keep going."



Audie picks up the ball to run around several defensive players, but then puts it back on the floor in a controlled dribble. Within radar range of the right hoop, he jumps into the air and flings the ball toward the metal ring. The ball kisses the ring and almost skids in. Audie is jumping up and down. Joey is tracking the new loose ball. In the rebound effort, it kicks loose and is bouncing toward our basket. Joey is right behind it. So is a San Diego player. The other player scoops up the ball and veers for a sure lay-up. It's too hard. Joey is now running in the other direction full speed.

All the players on the floor are running after the San Diego lay-up attempt. Joey and the ball are flying past them, going the other direction. The two forces almost collide. Joey is now by himself chasing a ball that he has been pursuing for three games. "Go for it! Joey, get in front of it!" All the players realize that they have just overrun the ball and they begin to chase. At the three quarter mark, Joey lunges at the moving ball. His momentum only serves to push the ball further beyond his reach. Joey lunges at the moving

ball. His momentum only serves to push the ball further beyond his reach. "Joey, slow down. Let it go out of bounds--let it go." Joey can't slow down. And doesn't want to try. He continues to run toward the wall at the end of the gym. I've seen that determination before. I start running after him. Then I see what Joey has in his mind. He dives for the ball. If he misses, he slams head first into a doorway. If he hits it, I don't--Joey lands on the ball. It's forward spin and shape punch Joey's body skyward. His arms wrap around the rubber like a child grappling with a favorite doll. He won't let go or be tossed off. The dive is followed by a bounce upward and a violent roll. Over and over, ball and Joey, Joey and the ball. They slam into the wall. Joey has his catch. He's got that ball. He jumps up in that awkward way he has. And holds the ball against his chest. His face is wide with pleasure. The official following the play doesn't know what to do. Everyone stops surrounding Joey and the ball. They are both a good twenty feet outside the end line. Joey's smile indicates that something wonderful has happened. The official gives ceremony to this catch. He whistles loudly three times; then with great NBA flare, he yells, "Out of bounds. San Diego ball."

Joey grins and nods his head, and unconsciously hops on one leg. He releases the ball by pulling both arms aside. The ball drops into the official's waiting hand. Joey races to take his place in the picket fence defense. I'm cheering inside. And crying. Yelling--"Defense. Come on." Joey shakes his fists in acknowledgement.

Somewhere in those first few moments of play, the floor tilted in our favor. It was one of those games where everything goes one way. Players get loose and then unstoppable. Michael - Eddie - Joey - Audie - and Jimmy become the players in their minds. They are Kareem and Dr. Dunk, Magic Johnson and a thousand television images. They fly down the floor. Tip the ball in. Throw court length bombs. Make baskets only dreamed about.

Before I can turn around, Audie is jumping at me. I catch his hips at eye level and absorb his crashing body. Joey lands on both of us, pounding us with his handkerchief fist. Michael catches the three of us in a great hug. Jimmy and Eddie join our dance.

We've won--42 to 12.

Everyone on the floor is jumping up and down. Shaking hands. Slapping backs. Even the San Diego players seemed delighted by events. I search out the San Diego coach. I want to apologize for not being able to keep the game closer. In the blur of bodies, waving towels, and flying uniform tops, I find the San Diego coach and express my concern.

"I'm sorry coach, I couldn't keep things a little more in control." The San Diego coach smiled broadly and pointed at his team. "Look, you kiddin', my kids think they killed you!"

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